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APA approves use of herbicide to control milfoil

by Jonathan Alexander

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RAY BROOK — In what's being called a precedent-setting move, the Adirondack Park Agency approved a project that allows the use of a chemical herbicide in an Adirondack lake for the first time.

With the agency's blessing, the town of Lake Luzerne will be permitted to use up to 1,560 pounds of the herbicide Renovate OTF to combat a widespread infestation of the lakeweed Eurasian Milfoil in the southern part of Lake Luzerne.

Chemical means of combating invasive plants have never been allowed before in waterways within the Adirondack Park.

The significance of this unanimous decision by the Park Agency's Board of Commissioners was not lost on board member Frank Mezzano.

"This could be the equivalent of the first cell tower in the

Adirondacks — In other words, we will be seeing more of it because it's (milfoil) a serious problem," Mezzano said. "And if it's a good solution, that's good for everybody."

For decades, environmentalists have been divided on whether herbicides should be used, with the ones opposing chemicals winning out in debates and court fights.

Adirondack Council executive director Brian Houseal said last week that although the his group isn't totally against the practice of using chemicals to fight invasives, it is keeping a close eye on how carefully the process is being conducted.

"We are concerned that this could be a precedent for the park. Water is one of our most precious resources," Houseal said. "We should be careful about chemicals and be sure that all the conditions are clear in this project so it can be used as a guide in the future."

Houseal said that issues of water quality head up the council's list of concerns and that using chemicals in the park's lakes must be done properly.

The council is also concerned about the potential impact that Renovate OTF could have on non-target plants, especially the vulnerable Freshwater Marigold species.

A member of the Triclopyr acid family of herbicide, Renovate OTF is specifically designed to target broad-leaved dicotic plants. A cousin to Eurasian milfoil, the Freshwater Marigold is threatened by the chemical.

An APA staff analysis concluded that of the 33 known indigenous plant species in Lake Luzerne, eight are dicotic and could suffer from the application if it is not properly conducted.

APA aquatic biologist Ed Sniznek said that in order to combat these pitfalls, the application would take place in mid-May, when the

indigenous plants have yet to sprout. Eurasian milfoil, he said, is an opportunistic plant and tends to begin growing well before the other species.

Sniznek said he was aware of the potential impact of this new shift in policy on behalf of the APA towards the use of herbicides.

"This project could serve as a model for the lakes in the Adirondacks," he said.

The 11-acre treatment area is only about 10 percent of the total area of the lake. The agency is requiring the town and its consultant to construct a temporary sequestration wall to keep the herbicide from spreading to other areas of the lake.

The concentration levels of the herbicide will be monitored within and outside of the treatment area, he said.

Over the last three years, the town has spent \$49,500 on more traditional methods of combating milfoil, like hand-picking and matting. But it has only been able to effectively fight the plant in 3.75 acres with these efforts.

In contrast, town officials said the one-time Renovate OTF application is expected cost between \$15,000 and \$20,000, and it is expected to control milfoil over nearly triple the area as with traditional methods.

Several years ago, the APA denied an application to use Sonar, a chemical proven to kill milfoil, in the shallow bays of Lake George.